

ARABIAN ORNAMENT.

PLATE XXXV.

Consists of different Mosaics taken from Pavements and Walls in Private Houses and Mosques in Cairo. They are executed in black and white marble, with red tile.

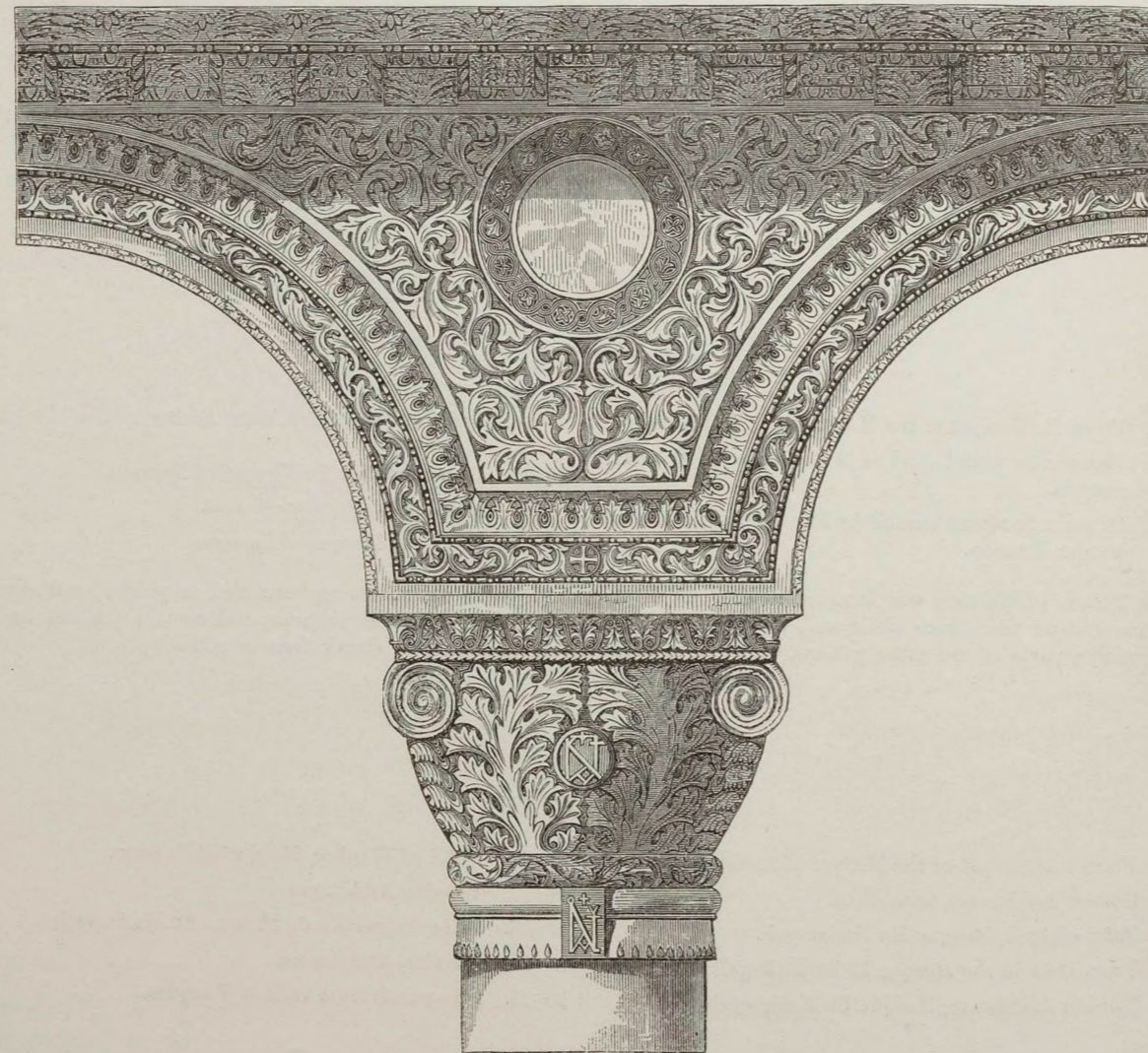
Nos. 14-16 are patterns engraved on the white marble slab, and filled in with red and black cement.

The ornament on the white marble on the centre of No. 21 is slightly in relief.

The materials for these five Plates have been kindly furnished by Mr. James William Wild, who passed considerable time in Cairo studying the interior decoration of the Arabian houses, and they may be regarded as very faithful transcripts of Cairean ornament.

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WHEN the religion of Mohammad spread with such astounding rapidity over the East, the growing wants of a new civilisation naturally led to the formation of a new style of Art; and whilst it is certain that the early edifices of the Mohammadans were either old Roman or Byzantine buildings adapted



Spandril of an arch from Sta. Sophia. SALZENBERG.

to their own uses, or buildings constructed on the ruins and with the materials of ancient monuments, it is equally certain that the new wants to be supplied, and the new feelings to be expressed, must at a very early period have given a peculiar character to their architecture.

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In the buildings which they constructed partly of old materials they endeavoured, in the new parts of the structure, to imitate the details borrowed from old buildings. The same result followed as had already taken place in the transformation of the Roman style to the Byzantine: the imitations were crude and imperfect. But this very imperfection gave birth to a new order of ideas; they never returned to the original model, but gradually threw off the shackles which the original model imposed. The Mohammadans, very early in their history, formed and perfected a style of Art peculiarly their own. The ornaments on Plate XXXI. are from the Mosque of Tooloon in Cairo, which was erected in 876, only 250 years after the establishment of Mohammadanism, and we in this mosque already find a style of architecture complete in itself,—retaining, it is true, traces of its origin, but being entirely freed from any direct imitation of the previous style. This result is very remarkable when compared with the results of the Christian religion in another direction. It can hardly be said that Christianity produced an architecture peculiarly its own, and entirely freed from traces of paganism, until the twelfth or thirteenth century.

The mosques of Cairo are amongst the most beautiful buildings in the world. They are remarkable at the same time for the grandeur and simplicity of their general forms, and for the refinement and elegance which the decoration of these forms displays.

This elegance of ornamentation appears to have been derived from the Persians, from whom the Arabs are supposed to have derived many of their arts. It is more than probable that this influence reached them by a double process. The art of Byzantium already displays an Asiatic influence. The remains at Bi Sutoun, published by Flandin and Coste, are either Persian under Byzantine influence, or, if of earlier date, there must be much of Byzantine art which was derived from Persian sources, so similar are they in general character of outline. We have already, in Chapter III., referred to an ornament on a Sassanian capital, No. 16, Plate XIV., which appears to be the type of the Arabian diapers; and on the spandril of the arch which we here introduce from Salzenberg's work on Sta. Sophia, will be seen a system of decoration totally at variance with much of the Græco-Roman features of that building, and which it may not be impossible are the result of some Asiatic influence. Be that as it may, this spandril is itself the foundation of the surface decoration of the Arabs and Moors. It will be observed that, although the leafage which surrounds the centre is still a reminiscence of the acanthus leaf, it is the first attempt at throwing off the principle of leafage growing out one from the other: the scroll is continuous without break. The pattern is distributed all over the spandril, so as to produce one even tint, which was ever the aim of the Arabs and Moors. There is also another feature connected with it,—the mouldings on the edge of the arch are ornamented from the surface, and the soffit of the arch is decorated in the same way as the soffits of Arabian and Moresque arches.

The collection of ornaments from the Mosque of Touloun, on Plate XXXI., are very remarkable as exhibiting in this early stage of Arabian art the types of all those arrangements of form which reach their culminating point in the Alhambra. The differences which exist result from the less perfection of the distribution of the forms, the leading principles are the same. They represent the first stage of surface decoration. They are of plaster, and the surface of the part to be decorated being first brought to an even face, the patterns were either stamped or traced upon the material whilst still in a plastic state, with a blunt instrument, which in making the incisions slightly rounded the edges. We at once recognise that the principles of the radiation of the lines from a parent stem and the tangential curvature of those lines had been either retained by Græco-Roman tradition, or was felt by them from observation of nature.

Many of the patterns, such as 2, 3, 4, 5, 12, 13, 32, 38, still retain traces of this Greek origin: two flowers, or a flower turned upwards and another downwards, from either end of a stalk; but